
The Fourth Estate and You

A Guide to Relations with the News Media

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The graphics on your map depict your command, arrayed across the battlefield. You think about the hundreds of pre-battle preparations your unit has accomplished. You know that within minutes the enemy will enter your sector and attack your soldiers. As you ask yourself whether you've considered every contingency—every possible situation—the executive officer approaches and says, "CNN is here."

Recent operations in Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia have demonstrated that the involvement of news media is an inescapable element of the operational environment. In today's global information environment, public opinion and government policy can be formed within minutes of the broadcast of live images from the battlefield.

Field Manual (FM) 100-6, *Information Operations*, acknowledges the importance of telling the Army story: *DOD and Army policy for principles of combat coverage require Army commanders to provide open and independent coverage by the news media as the standard means of providing the American public information about the employment and capabilities of their armed forces.* The manual further charges all commanders and leaders with "preparing their soldiers to effectively deal with the media before, during, and after all operations."

If you are a commander at company, battalion, or brigade level, you have no special staff to address public affairs issues. But this does not relieve you of public affairs responsibilities, because units at these levels often have to house, support, and escort reporters. They must therefore be trained and ready to provide this support and tell the Army

story without the presence of public affairs specialists.

Helping media personnel get their story may seem like a distraction and a drain on resources. But a commander with a well-defined *information strategy* will recognize a media event for what it is—a chance to tell his unit's and the Army's story to the American public.

Your information strategy begins with a designated unit media facilitator (UMF) and a media facilitation process.

Unit Media Facilitator

The UMF should be identified at home station before deployment. You may appoint him on orders as an additional duty. This will enable him to seek additional media relations training from home station public affairs personnel.

Choose your UMF carefully, keeping in mind that he will be spokesman for the unit when he escorts the media. The following criteria will help you select the right person:

- He must have the experience to explain events reporters may see, and translate these events into language civilians will understand.
- He must be able to plan and allocate resources, such as transportation and time, to meet your intent for the interview.
- He must be able to move around the battlefield to meet the media personnel. This includes greeting them for scheduled events and intercepting them during unscheduled events.
- Consider a UMF candidate's personality and disposition. Everything he does when he is with a reporter can affect the story.

The UMF is responsible for all media facilitation planning and oversees the execution of media events. To ensure that all aspects of the operation run smoothly, he must have your full support.

Media Facilitation Process

The media facilitation process, which is a part of a unit's information operations, attempts to narrow the inevitable gap between what you know to be true and what the news media have reported. You and other unit leaders can narrow this gap by providing timely, accurate information about your unit and its actions.

It is important to remember that the reporter owns only half the interview; you own the other half. A unit leader not only answers the reporter's questions, he also ties in messages to specific audiences he wants to reach, such as family members or the American public as a whole.

The media facilitation process is a four-step drill that considers the media event from beginning to end—from planning and wargaming the impending event, through the interview itself, to reporting the results to higher headquarters. Planning for the entire event is critical, because the interview does not start when the camera starts recording—it starts when the first member of the unit shakes the reporter's hand, and it ends when the reporter drives away. Everything the unit does with the reporter between those two points can influence the story, positively or negatively.

The drill described here is for a *scheduled* media event with approximately 24 hours of planning time. Like

other drills, however, the amount of time available will dictate the level of detail that can be given to each step. When media personnel arrive unscheduled, a unit can execute these four steps within minutes:

Planning and Wagaming. When planning media facilitation operations, consider first your intent for the interview. Decide before the event the basic themes for the interview and the intended audiences for them. These themes will guide the interviewees in what to say to the reporter and also guide what the UMF shows to the reporters for footage.

The second consideration is the background of the reporters requesting the interview. Research those who are scheduled to come to your unit. A reporter's experience in covering military operations may determine the amount of explaining and translating that will be required. The news organization they work for may provide information on what they want to know. Higher headquarters public affairs elements should provide a fact sheet on each reporter. If they don't, ask for it. Also contact other units within the area of operations that may have dealt with this reporter.

Next, consider "what's the news" in the unit area. Reporters tend to focus on certain issues during any conflict. These include actions against the enemy, friendly casualties, fratricide, protection of American soldiers, collateral damage, necessity for our nation's involvement, and potential future operations.

Examine every event in the unit's area within the past 48 to 72 hours for its potential news value, and consider any "dirty laundry" a unit may have. Never assume the news media won't know about a specific event. Also examine what is in the news around the world, especially any other operations the United States is conducting. Events in another operation may affect a reporter's line of questioning.

Finally, determine any "good news" stories in the unit that can be offered to the reporter, such as a recent award to a hero of the battle or successful dealings with the local population. A good human-interest angle may cause a reporter

to change his story altogether.

Wargame questions the reporter may ask and then develop appropriate responses. These questions derive from the "what's the news" topics. Make them tough—it's better to ask yourself the tough questions and develop satisfactory answers than to get the same questions from the reporter first. When developing appropriate responses to the questions, consult the Public Affairs Annex and Guidance to the current operation order. For particularly difficult questions, also consult the higher headquarters public affairs officer (PAO). Do not try to memorize long, exact sentences as answers. Instead, develop a command message matrix with bullet comments to guide the answers of the interviewee. (A sample matrix is shown here.)

Next, identify the media support requirements. Determine these requirements by using the standard mission analysis techniques of identifying specified and implied tasks. Carefully consider your themes for the interview and any support requirements they may generate. Also consider conducting a rehearsal and a "murder board" of the interviewees as time allows.

The final planning consideration is developing a proposed itinerary for the reporters. Ensure that all supporting elements—such as transportation, convoy security, and designated interviewees—have the itinerary and are ready at the designated time. Identify ahead of time the areas to which access will be granted on the basis of security concerns and your understanding of what reporters need: Video and still photog-

raphers need supporting action footage that defines their story; print reporters need additional time with the interviewees; and radio reporters need supporting action sounds and more descriptive language from the interviewees.

Greeting the Reporter. Since the interview actually starts when you meet the reporter, the greeting can set the tone for the entire interview.

Ensure that any perimeter guards or security forces know of the reporter's impending arrival. Expedite his passage through the unit's security procedures. Because reporters operate on stringent deadlines, time is literally money for them, and unnecessary delays can instill a hostile attitude toward the unit. Be friendly! A pleasant smile and a handshake can go a long way. Offer any appropriate pleasantries, such as coffee, juice, or a chance to warm up in a tent. Use first names with the reporter.

Ask the reporter what story he is investigating and how the unit can assist him. Brief him on the proposed itinerary and what is planned for him to see. Set a time limit for interviewing commanders and primary staff, and establish which person will be able to answer the more in-depth questions. Explain any specific rules and safety or security concerns while in the unit area.

Conducting the Interview. The UMF should monitor the interviews. He acts as the timekeeper for the interview, listens for operational security violations, and watches the reporter for any signs of confusion. After the interview, the UMF asks the reporter not to use any operational security disclosures,

SAMPLE COMMAND MESSAGE MATRIX	
<i>If a reporter asks about:</i>	<i>Formulate your answer with:</i>
Casualties	1. Condolence to families. 2. Classify as light/medium/heavy. 3. Best combat medical care.
Fratricide	1. Condolence to families. 2. Incident under investigation.
Rules of Engagement	1. Can't discuss specifics; would give advantage to enemy. 2. Soldiers trained to protect selves.
Future Operations	1. Can't discuss specifics; would give info to enemy. 2. Soldiers trained for any mission.
Collateral Damage	1. Sympathy to civilians. 2. Soldiers trained on minimizing damage.
Enemy use of Weapons of Mass Destruction	1. Soldiers trained to protect selves. 2. Condemn enemy for use.

interprets or translates any confusing military terms, and corrects any inaccuracies an interviewee may have stated. The UMF also acts on any commitments the interviewee may have promised, such as access to a certain soldier or area.

Make sure that the camera doesn't inadvertently record anything behind the interviewee that could violate operational security. Ask the camera operator to move the interview, if necessary; but such pictures as the outside of a command post, two soldiers digging a hole, and a vehicle's bumper number are generally not secret.

This article is not intended to present a treatise on interview tactics, techniques, and procedures. Several excellent graphic training aids containing interview tips are available. Installation PAOs should be able to provide these training aids and any in-depth media training your unit may need.

There are, however, several interview tips that are fundamental to media relations:

- Concentrate on what you *can* say, not what you can't. Public Affairs guidance, proper planning, and wargaming prior to the interview will identify what you can say.
- Stay in your lane. Discuss only those things for which you are directly responsible.
- If you can't tell the reporter something, explain why.
- If you don't want the media to report it, don't say it or show it. If there

is a possible operational security violation, ask the reporter not to use that information, and report it to higher headquarters immediately.

- Never lie to the media. It will come back to haunt you.
- If you don't know an answer, say you don't know. Don't speculate or guess.
- *Everything* is "on the record."
- Be absolute only if you're sure that what you're saying is true.
- Remain calm and in control throughout the interview, even if the reporter is belligerent or aggressive. Reporters can edit out *their* antagonism and show only *your* hostile attitude to the American public.

• Always tie the interview back to one of the messages that support your themes.

Reporting the Results. After the event is complete and the media personnel have left, report the results of the interviews to higher headquarters. This report should include the following information:

- The reporters' lines of questioning.
- The reporters' prevailing attitudes.
- Any possible operational security violations.
- Possible slant to the reporter's story.
- Your overall impression of the interviews.

Share this information with other units through daily situation reports and tactical updates. Do not assume that a higher headquarters public affairs escort

will submit them.

FM 100-6 recognizes that the military services and the news media are often at opposite ends of the spectrum when dealing with information. But the FM also says that the Army "accepts and fully endorses the healthy tension that exists between the normal desire of the media to inform the public as much as possible about military operations and the normal desire of commanders to control the information environment about those same operations to the greatest possible degree."

As a commander, you can't control the final product of an interview—the news piece itself—but you can influence its development, either positively or negatively. If your unit has an effective information strategy and a media facilitation plan, you can positively influence the reporters' final product and effectively tell both their story and the Army's story.

The next time the executive officer announces, "CNN is here," you'll know you've considered every contingency, every possible situation, when you answer, "Execute the media facilitation plan."

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